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Abstract

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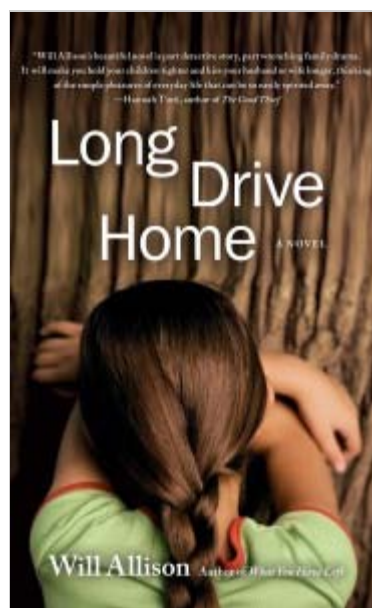


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The second time Juwan almost killed us came less than a minute later. At that point, I was feeling like I'd been shot out of a cannon and wasn't coming down anytime soon. "Is this the craziest drive ever, or what?" I was saying, trying to downplay it for Sara, take her mind off her shoulder. I

wanted to get us home. In the time it took to reach our street, though, Juwan had made a loop through the neighborhood, and suddenly there he was again, headed toward us. I don't think I'd ever seen anyone driving so fast on our street. We lived in a sleepy little enclave of shady lanes and tidy 1920s-era homes, a neighborhood so quiet that the local driving schools routinely used it for lessons, the kind of place where you felt okay letting your first-grader ride her bike around the block alone. And here was this joker, practically flying. You son of a bitch, I thought. And then, instead of laying on the horn or just letting him pass, I lashed out. It was instinct, more a reaction than a decision. I cut the wheel to the left—as if I were going to turn in front of him into our driveway—then back to the right, to get out of the way. I was trying to give him a scare, slow him down, teach him a lesson. I figured at worst he'd slam on the brakes. Instead, he swerved into *our* lane, like he meant to squeeze past us on the other side. But since we were still there, not actually turning, he kept swerving—until his front tire caught the curb. The rest happened in a blink. His back end came around, the car went up on two wheels, and just like that it was rolling side over side, coming right at us.

* * *

Later, you told me it happened too fast for you to be scared. I had enough time to be scared but not enough to appreciate what a mistake I'd made. That didn't sink in until afterwards. Even now, more than two years later, I can hardly admit it to myself, the danger I put you in. Sometimes I look at you and it comes back to me like a sharp blow to the chest.

* * *

I was twisted around in my seat. Sara was looking at me and saying something, but the sound of the car hitting the tree was still in my ears. Turns out that's what had saved us, one of the big sycamores along the curb. Sara had to say it again: "Dad, you're squeezing me." I was squeezing her. I had her by the wrist. When it had seemed the car would end up on top of us, I'd reached for her in the backseat, as if there were a thing in the world I could have done.

Now I let go, thinking *thank God* but also *oh my God*. Sara wiped her eyes and looked at the convertible lying upside down in our neighbor Clarice's yard. The soft top had come loose, its fabric and metal frame sticking out

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from under the car like a broken wing. There were silvery hollows where the headlights had been.

“He knocked down the gaslight,” she said.

I watched the sagging windshield for any sign of the driver. Only when I spotted an orange sneaker next to the car did it hit me, the fact that I actually might have killed someone. And even as the thought flashed through my head, I couldn’t believe it. The idea that my actions could have caused the death of another human being was even more preposterous than the idea of somebody walking away from that wreck alive. I told Sara to stay in the car.

“No,” she said, tugging at her seat belt. “Wait.”

Before I could decide what to do, Clarice was next to our car, frantic in her blue bathrobe, saying something about a boy lying in her yard. I didn’t see a boy, but I saw the phone in her hand and understood the police would be there soon. My first impulse was to drive away. The car was still running, still in gear; if only she hadn’t been there, all I would have needed to do was lift my foot off the brake.

“Clarice,” I said, getting Sara out of the car. “Can you watch Sara?”

I hardly knew Clarice—she was some kind of professor at Seton Hall, or retired professor, and seemed never to get dressed—but she gave a quick nod and put an arm around Sara. I told Sara not to worry, I’d be right back. By then our mail carrier and a guy in gray sweats with a little dog were coming across the street. They were both on their phones too. They stopped short of the convertible, and when I came around the tree, I saw why. There was a body on the lawn between them—facedown, elbows out, legs crossed at the ankles. It took me a moment to realize it was the driver, that he’d been thrown from the car and not hit by it. He wore a plaid flannel shirt over a brown hooded sweatshirt, loose jeans, argyle socks. One orange sneaker was missing. The dog walker was telling the mail carrier not to touch him, his neck might be broken.

“Is he dead?” I said.

“Don’t know,” the mail carrier said.

The guy in sweats shifted his dog, a Yorkie, from one arm to the other, juggling his phone. “They want to know if he’s breathing.”

The mail carrier got down on all fours. Juwan’s head was cocked at a funny angle, and the shape of it was all wrong, with a dent on one side and a bulge on the other. A thin line of blood was coming out of his ear.

“Can’t tell,” the mail carrier said. “Maybe we should turn him over.”

“Are you crazy?” the dog walker said.

Juwan’s blood was dripping into the grass. I stepped back onto Clarice’s driveway, dizzy and breathless. The Halloween skeleton on her front door clattered in the breeze. Across the street in our yard, Sara was holding Clarice’s hand and eating a candy bar, looking shell-shocked. I figured she must have picked it up off the ground, which I now saw was littered with debris from the Jaguar—sunglasses, empty water bottles, spiral notebooks, CDs sparkling in the sun. I shouted for her to drop it. She stopped chewing and stared at me.

“What I want to know,” the dog walker said, “is what a kid like that is doing with a Jag.”

“Wait,” the mail carrier said. “I think I got a pulse.”

Seeing his fingers on Juwan’s wrist, I made the mistake of letting myself believe he might make it. The dog walker relayed the news into his phone, then corrected the dispatcher: “No, no. I said *maybe* a pulse.” His dog started to bark. Across the street, Sara was holding the candy bar halfway to her mouth, still trying to figure out what my problem was.

Will Allison’s new novel, Long Drive Home, will be published on May 17 by Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. His first novel, What You Have Left, was selected for Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers, Borders Original Voices, and Book Sense Picks, and was named one of 2007’s notable books by The San Francisco Chronicle. Born in South Carolina, he now lives with his wife and daughter in New Jersey.